

# Short Paper #1: Ethics of "Taste, Ties, and Time"

## Data and Method of the Inspected Paper

Without explicit informing the research sample subjects, the researchers collect their data on Facebook, including the personal profile (with anonymity), photos, activity and interest information, the log in time, and network relations. The researchers utilize the data for exploratory analyses of the relations between people's preference and network ties. The sample subjects are 1,640 college freshmen in 2006, from one specific but anonymous college (Lewis et al, 2008).

## Ethic Principles Inspection

### Principle I. Respect for persons

This research partially failed to conform with the "respect for persons" principle. According to *The Belmont Report*, the main idea of this guideline is to protect subjects' autonomy. It often means the subjects' free choice and consent based on the understanding of the research. Unfortunately, researchers conducted this research literally "under table," and not any one of the sample subjects was informed about the project until its publication. Although the approval of research-purpose data usage has undoubtedly been included in Facebook's user clause, it by no means could caught any users' awareness, including the sample subjects', especially when they were signing the contract. This leads to the controversy on this ethical issue.

Regarding this topic, Salganik in his book, *Bit by Bit: Social Research in the Digital Age*, provided a guideline that "the participants should be presented with relevant information in a comprehensible format." When it comes to subject consent, this research definitely failed to meet this higher standard. Since the sample subjects, and the researchers themselves as well, could never imagined this project at the time the subjects signed Facebook's Terms of Use consent, let alone provided comprehensible information.

### Principle II. Beneficence

This research partially failed to conform with the "beneficence" principle. This principle emphasizes the process of carrying out research subjects' risk/benefit analysis, and, after that, striking a balance between the good and bad on a basis of ethical standard (The Belmont Report, 1978). In regard with ethical conformity of the target research paper on this principle, the first thing could be suspected is if its risk/benefit analysis was solidly performed before the research proceeded. As a private institution, Facebook had no reason to do a

sufficient consideration on the subjects' behalf, as long as the research has practically no direct impacts on the subjects and not a threat to its public reputation. While the IRB was not responsible for this research design, it is reasonable to assume that the risk/benefit analysis might not be performed fully.

Another point worthy of consideration is the research's data protection. Though intentionally cut off the information can be directly connected to subjects' identity, this data set, later on published and openly provided for research use, contained too much indirect clues, such as the precise preference and friend relationships, which were not encrypted at all and could easily be used to "map" up the exact school and even a specific student (Parry, 2011). This big loop hole put all the subjects' privacy in peril.

### Principle III. Justice

This research seriously failed to conform with the "justice" principle. Generally speaking, justice principle has broad indications in different perspectives. This target research was not able to fulfill a couple of them, including the interest of minority and the direct interest of sample subjects.

For the starter, this research chose a specific college, which has later been identified as Harvard college. It indeed resulted in a crucial selection bias, and was harmful to minority's interest. This college represents a special group of young people who are well-educated, with a higher than average intelligence capacity. Some would describe the school "elite" that means the exclusion of the people below the ordinary. This reality makes validity of the research result constrained to people from an upper-class background, and left out the understanding of the "general" people.

In addition, the research did not provide any direct compensation to their subjects. That means although the subjects provided their various information as the foundation of this research, they did not have anything in return. The fact that lacking a quid pro quo relation indicates the research's violation of justice principle.

### Principle IV. Respect for law and public interest

This research slightly failed to conform with the "respect for law and public interest" principle. Gladly, this project technically has no formal legal problem as Facebook had a detailed Term of Use contract, and that makes this project conformed to the first component of this principle proposed in The Menlo Report.

However, the research did fail to fully comply to the second component of this principle, transparency-based accountability (The Menlo Report, 2012). It requires the lucid of research method, data, and results along with the research progresses. This research published on a journal that makes its result transparent, while, on the other hand, the process of collecting data and the way they performed the research were all unknown to the public before it was finally published. This made the research not entirely conformed to the public interest.

## Conclusion

While it is obvious that the data collection works for this research are performed within Facebook, a private for-profit enterprise, which technically doesn't have any "moral" responsibility except obeying the law, the researchers have to do a step further on the ethical concerns, or they are simply risking their academic reputation.

I believe the school's IRB should also assume more in this and similar cases in the future, while it is much tougher to demand the for-profit companies like Facebook to follow a higher moral standard with an additional cost of performing research. From the perspective of protecting the research subjects, the researchers, and minimizing the future risk of tarnishing the university's reputation, the IRB should be more active and involve in the research designs, nevertheless the data works happened outside academia. After all, the society usually gives the academia a higher ethic standard, especially when many of the research universities are backed by government funds, which means the people are sponsoring the research. And who would like the research they sponsored to do harm to themselves?

## Whether or not I would use this data for my own research?

After all the considerations above, I would prefer not to use this data for now. That involves in too many moral issues, and the most difficult part, I believe, is always the communication with the experiment subjects, such as acquiring consents or after-experiment caring. Unlike other principles, such as maximizing the benefit or holding the equality, which are mostly controlled by experiment design on the researchers themselves, the autonomous part requires the interactions between the researchers and experiment subjects. And for those study utilizing digital data, the subject number is often too large to be practical to do sufficient communication.

Due to the reality that people rely heavily on computers and the internet, many of the human behaviors can only be observed in digital format. Due to the potential benefit of digital data (Watts, 2014), I do believe, sooner or less, there would be a systematic approach either from the legal/government system or the academia, to reduce the cost of conforming the ethical principles while securing the autonomy of the subjects to a certain degree which is recognized by the society. It could be a law which set up a standard operating guideline in this kind of digital experiment, including details like the form and timing doing the consent, for the researchers in the private or academic sectors alike to follow. On top of that, at the same time, the society needs sufficient education about this potential law and the principles behind it perhaps through both mass media and school systems. It is urgent and important to building up a solid framework which protects not only the experiment subjects but also the researchers. After that, researchers like me would eventually be free

to explore the human related knowledge in the digital era, which brought off the unprecedented opportunity to understand we complex human beings.

## References

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